

Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation

January 31, 2020

Recreation and Parks Advisory Board, City of Oak Ridge
c/o Jon Hetrick, Director, Recreation and Parks Department
City of Oak Ridge, PO Box 1, Oak Ridge, TN 37831 Via email: jhetrick@oakridgetn.gov

Subject: Proposal for new trail on Black Oak Ridge Conservation Easement

Board members:

Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation (AFORR) was both interested and concerned to learn (from *The Oak Ridger* and citizens who were at the Board's January 2020 meeting) of your Board's discussion of a proposal to build a new trail on the Black Oak Conservation Easement (BORCE) to take the place of the gravel road/trail (East Fork Road) that may be affected by future development in the Horizon Center industrial park, including the proposed development of a powerline along the road.

AFORR shares your appreciation of the recreational value of trails in the BORCE. However, AFORR is very disturbed about the proposal to create a new trail in this area in order to enable development of a powerline. We remind the Board that the BORCE was established in 2007 as a Natural Resources Damages Assessment (NRDA) compensation for natural resources lost due to contamination of Watts Bar Reservoir. The 3,073 acres of the BORCE were dedicated to conservation as compensation for ecological and recreational losses resulting from the contamination, and the compensatory value was calculated in terms both of ecological benefits (including conservation of habitat for threatened and endangered species) and public recreational benefits. Ecological benefits were valued at 441,000 present-value acre-years of ecological services and the present value of recreational benefits (from hiking, hunting, etc.) was calculated as \$6.6 million in 2006 dollars. The Management Plan for the BORCE was crafted to ensure that these benefits would be preserved. Regarding the eastern section of the BORCE (i.e., east of Blair Road), the plan (page 5-6) calls for the land to be managed according to the same principles policies that apply to Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) Class II Natural-Scientific Natural Areas. Such areas are managed primarily for restoration and enhancement of their ecological integrity. The BORCE Management plan states (on page 7):

The [eastern BORCE] will be managed as a Class II Natural Area under the Natural Areas Preservation Act of 1971 (T.C.A. 11-14-101) (Appendix E). The classification is "natural-scientific... which are areas associated with and containing floral assemblages, forest types, fossil assemblages, geological phenomena, hydrological phenomena, swamplands and other similar features or phenomena which are unique in natural or scientific value and are worthy of perpetual preservation" (T.C.A. 11-14-105). The area is managed in accordance with the Rules for Management of Tennessee Natural Resource Areas Chapter 0400-2-8, Appendix F).

T.C.A. 11-14-106 states that "Class II areas may be developed with foot trails, foot bridges, overlooks and primitive campgrounds" and also "may be developed with such facilities as may be reasonably necessary for the dissemination of educational material and for the safe and proper management and protection of the area; provided, that no such facility shall be constructed or sited in such a manner as to be inconsistent with the preservation of the natural or scientific values in a Class II area." Note that there is no provision for bicycle trails to be built in Class II areas and that any facilities built in such areas are to be carefully planned to preserve and protect natural features. Consistent with this language, the only recreational facilities contemplated for the eastern BORCE by NRDA document and the BORCH Management Plan are very limited additions of trails. The NRDA document mentioned the possibility of extending the North Boundary Greenway through the southern end of the eastern BORCE

to create a loop trail, and the subsequent Management Plan stated that “Consideration will be given to expanding the greenway into the BORCE conservation area along existing roads” (page 11, also see page 3). This expansion has, in fact, occurred via the current use of the East Fork Road (which was considered to fall within the BORCE boundaries when the BORCE was established) as a greenway.

AFORR is sympathetic to the state’s reasons for restricting trail development in this area. Even a carefully designed trail can be detrimental to fragile ecological resources (for example, trail users may unintentionally bring seeds of invasive species into an interior forest), and a new trail on the rather steep hillsides in the BORCE would inevitably present challenges related to drainage and erosion. State agencies have already expressed concern to the City about trails that citizens built in the eastern BORCE without prior state approval and that may have harmed ecological assets that the BORCE was created to protect.

If future development of the Horizon Center and new powerlines to service it result in the loss of the recreational use of all or part of the East Fork Road as a greenway, AFORR agrees that it would be appropriate to cooperate with the state on development of a replacement trail within the BORCE, but we contend that it is premature to take any such action at this time. It would be foolish to develop a trail that would permanently affect the natural assets of the BORCE to replace a recreational feature that hasn’t yet been lost. We believe that impacts on the trail (and ecological assets in adjacent areas of the BORCE and the Horizon Center natural areas) from supplying electric power to the Horizon Center can be avoided by constructing a powerline along the right-of-way (adjacent to Blair Road and State Route 95) used by the existing 13-kV line that serves the Horizon Center. Accordingly, any development of a replacement trail should apply only to the section of the existing patrol road/trail that crosses "development areas" within the northeastern part of Horizon Center. Furthermore, no such trail development (which would require additional crossings of an ecologically significant stream) should occur unless and until the existing trail is lost. Future owners of those Horizon Center development areas may decide that having this popular trail run through their site is an asset for their business!

Note that any changes to the BORCE would need to be approved by the Natural Resource Trustees, which are the State of Tennessee, Tennessee Valley Authority, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Department of Energy (DOE). In addition, the NRDA process may require a new economic evaluation and approval by concerned stakeholders.

We thank you for consideration of these concerns.

Sincerely,

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